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The Teaching of indigenous *Orang Asli* language in Peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract

According to Krauss (2007) there are approximately six thousand languages still spoken by mankind, between twenty and fifty percent of the 6,000 are no longer spoken by children or will no longer be spoken by children by the end of this century. Of the six thousand or so languages spoken on earth, three hundred to five hundred can still be considered “safe.” i.e., will continue to be learned by children in the traditional way for the foreseeable future. This has prompted a need to stabilization, revival, and maintenance of our indigenous languages. This paper presents the Semai indigenous *Orang Asli* language teaching programme as an effort of maintaining the indigenous *Orang Asli* language in Malaysia. The Semai language teaching programme was implemented in 1998 in Semai schools in Peninsular Malaysia as part of preserving the minority indigenous language from endangerment. The programme was an outcome of the efforts made by the Semai indigenous *Orang Asli* community by engaging themselves with relevant government authorities particularly the Curriculum Development Division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Semai belongs to the Senoic, Central Aslian sub-group of indigenous *Orang Asli*. The Senoi are the largest sub-group of the *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia and make up about 53.4% of the *Orang Asli* population.

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1. Introduction

United Nations Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1993 states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples also have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

According to Krauss (2007) there are approximately 6,000 languages still spoken by mankind: between 20 and 50% of the 6,000 are no longer spoken by children or will no longer be spoken by children by the end of this century. Of the 6,000 or so languages spoken on earth, 300 to 500 can still be considered “safe”: i.e., they will continue to be learned by children in the traditional way for the foreseeable future. This has prompted a need to safeguard the minority indigenous language from endangerment.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the indigenous minority peoples are commonly known as the *Orang Asli*. They make up about 0.5 percent of the total national population. The term ‘Orang Asli’ literally means the original or first peoples of the peninsular Malaysia. They are about 18 subgroups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and they are broadly classified by the Malaysian Department of Orang Asli's Progress (JAKOA) under three main groups. They are a) The Senoi b) The Aboriginal Malay (Proto-Malay) c) The Negrito (UNICEF & CDC, Ministry of Education Malaysia (1998).

According to Burenhult (2001), Wazir Jahan Karim (2001), many indigenous Orang Asli languages and cultural traditions in Peninsular Malaysia are in danger of extinction. This situation is made worse when many of these indigenous Orang Asli languages of Peninsular Malaysia are not documented; this problem has been highlighted by many scholars on Orang Asli studies in Malaysia (Benjamin (1976, 2012), Burenhult (2002), Wazir Jahan Karim (2001).

Language maintenance is a sociolinguistic term which is closely related to ‘language revitalisation’. According to Carmen Llamas, Louise Mullany & Peter Stockwell (2007), language maintenance is the situation whereby a language (often a minority language) is retained and used by speakers alongside, or instead of, a more dominant language. It requires collaborative effort among community groups, linguists and various government agencies. Fasold (1984) states that language maintenance occurs when a community collectively decides to continue using the language or languages it has traditionally used. Holmes (2008) points out that sometimes a community becomes aware that its language is in danger of disappearing and thereby takes deliberate steps to revitalise and consequently maintain it. For example, to preserve and maintain the indigenous language in New Zealand, attempts have been made to reverse language shift and revitalise Maori language.

In Malaysia, the effort to preserve and maintain the endangered Semai Orang Asli language through indigenous language teaching was first made as a result of positive collaboration between the native Semai community and the relevant government agencies, in particular the Ministry of Education and the Department of Orang Asli's Progress (JAKOA).

2. The Indigenous Minority Peoples (*Orang Asli*) In Malaysia

The Malaysian Department of Orang Asli's Progress (JAKOA) classifies the indigenous Orang Asli under three main groups viz a) The Senoi b) The Aboriginal Malay (Proto-Malay) and c) The Negrito (UNICEF & CDC, Ministry of Education Malaysia (1998).

Benjamin (2012), on the other hand, classifies the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia under four broad sub-categories according to their distinctive Aslian language groups i.e. the Northern Aslian (the Jahaic), the Central Aslian (the Senoic), the Jah Hut and the Southern Aslian (the Semelaic). As the Aboriginal Malays are part of the Austronesian language group ('Malayaic'), they are not classified under the Aslian sub-groups but rather belong to ‘specifically Malay’ dialects. The term ‘Aslian’, which derives from ‘Orang Asli’, was first proposed by Diffloth in the 1970s, and later introduced into the literature in Diffloth (1974) and Benjamin (1976).

The Senoi (the Central Aslian) are the largest group of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia . They make up about 56% of the Orang Asli population. The Senoi subgroups are mainly found along the main range in the states of Perak, Pahang and Kelantan (Semai, Temiar), in Central Pahang (Jah Hut, Che Wong), Coastal Selangor (Mah Mari) and South-central Pahang (Semoq Beri). Some of the subgroups are dependent on the forest for their living while the others have ventured into permanent agricultural activities (e.g. managing rubber, oil palm or cocoa farms) and in the wage sector (in skilled and unskilled even professional occupations) (Nicholas, 2000).

Benjamins (2012) classifies Semai community as belong to Central Aslian (Senoic) group of Orang Asli. Diffloth (1984) suggests that the Aslian language of Peninsular Malaysia are most closely related to Mon, the classical inscriptional language of central of southern Thailand and Southern Burma. The Aslian languages including Semai have been influenced lexically and grammatically from various languages including Mon, Khmer, Thai and Malay.

The Aboriginal Malays (or the Proto Malays) are the second largest group of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. They are classified by Benjamin (2012) as the Austronesian language group ('Malayaic'), belonging to 'specifically Malay' dialects. The Aboriginal Malays make up about 41.4% of the Orang Asli population. They are mainly found in the Southern half of the Peninsular Malaysia including Selangor and Negeri Sembilan (Temuan), Central Pahang and East Negeri Sembilan (Semelai) South Pahang and North Johor (Jakun), East Johor (Orang Kanaq) and West central coast of Johor (Orang Kuala, Orang Seletar). Since these subgroups of Orang Asli have assimilated with Austronasean-speakers, they are also known as Proto or early Malays. The Aboriginal or Proto-Malays are very settled people. They take part in permanent agricultural, river or coastal fishing, entrepreneurial and professional occupations (Nicholas, 2000).

The Negrito, on the other hand, are comprised of only over 2% of the Orang Asli population. Benjamins (2012) classifies the Negrito under the Northern Aslian sub-group. They are the smallest group of Orang Asli sub groups in Peninsular Malaysia. The Negritos are commonly found in northern part of Peninsular Malaysia including Northeast of Kedah (the Kensiu people), Kedah-Perak border (Kintak), Northeast Perak and West Kelantan (Jahai) North-central Perak (Lanoh), Southeast Kelantan (Mendriq) and Northeast Pahang and South Kelantan (Batek). Their language is of the Aslian family of Mon-Khmer languages (Benjamin 1996). They are normally associated with extracting forest products to be exchanged for cash (e.g. collecting rattan and 'Gaharu' wood) and often considered as economically backward of the Orang Asli subgroups (Nicholas, 2000).

Figure 1 below summarises the Subgroups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and **Table 1** shows the Population Distribution of Orang Asli by sub groups and location according to JAKOA's classification.

Figure 1: The Subgroups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (JAKOA's Classification).



Table 1: The Population Distribution of the Orang Asli by subgroups and Location, 2008

Subgroup	Location	Population	%
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<i>The Negrito</i>			
Kensiu	Northeast Kedah	224	1.00
Kintak	Kedah-Perak Border	112	0.00
Jahai	Northeast Perak and West Kelantan.	1663	2.00
Lanoh	Northcentral Perak	244	1.00
Mendriq	Southeast kelantan	268	1.00
Bateq	Northeast Pahang and South Kelantan	1660	2.0
	<i>Sub Total</i>	3671	3.00
<i>The Senoi</i>			
Semai	Northwest Pahang and South Perak	42,383	30.00
Temiar	North Perak and South Kelantan	24,908	18.00
Jah Hut	Central Pahang	3762	3.00
Chewong	Central Pahang	456	1.00
Mah Meri	Coastal Selangor	3675	3.00
Semoq Beri	South Central Pahang	3972	3.00
	<i>Sub Total</i>	79156	56.00
<i>The Aboriginal Malay</i>			
Temuan	Selangor and Negeri Sembilan	22,736	16.00
Semelai	Central pahang and East Negeri Sembilan	6272	5.00
Jakun	South Pahang and North Johor	24977	18.00
Orang kanaq	East Johor	157	1.00
Orang Kuala	West and South Coasts of Johor	3010	3.00
Orang Seletar	West and South Coasts of Johor	1251	1.00
	<i>Sub Total</i>	58403	42.00
	<i>Total</i>	141230	100

Adapted from JHEOA (2008) based on Data Maklumat Asas JEHOA.

Of all the Orang Asli subgroups in Peninsular Malaysia, the Semai make up the largest population with the population of about 42,383 (30%). (JHEOA, 2008).

Due to its significant demographics, the language has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Information as the main language for the Orang Asli Radio broadcasting programme, which is aired by Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) *Asyik FM* (the first indigenous Orang Asli radio station in Peninsular Malaysia). It has also been chosen as the first indigenous Orang Asli language to be taught in schools in Peninsular Malaysia with predominantly Semai pupils.

This paper reports on the Semai Indigenous Language Teaching Programme undertaken as a result of collaborative effort made by the Semai community in Peninsular Malaysia and other relevant government agencies i.e. The Ministry of Education, Malaysia and the Department of Orang Asli (Indigenous) Progress (JAKOA).

3. The Historical Development Of The Semai Indigenous Language Teaching Programme In Peninsular Malaysia

Before 1996, the Orang Asli schools were under the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA). JHEOA was part of the Ministry of Home Affairs and it was formed in 1954 under the British mandate. Its powers and functions were defined by the Aboriginal People Ordinance of 1954, revised in 1974 with the aim of protecting the Peninsular Aborigines and promoting of their socio-economic development. JHEOA deals with matters related to health, housing, education, agricultural and forest policy. The ultimate aim is to integrate the Orang Asli community and to encourage them to settle while respecting their desire to maintain their own cultural traditions. In 1994 JHEOA was transferred to the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, and now it is now under the responsibility of the Ministry of Rural Development and in 1996, the Orang Asli schools were entrusted to the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

The effort to include Semai language as part of Ethnic Indigenous Minority Language Programme was first made as a result of the initiative made between the representatives of the Semai population (the Orang Asli Headmen: The *Tok Batin*), the Semai teachers, Persatuan Orang Asli Semanjung Malaysia (POASM – the Association of Orang Asli in Peninsula Malaysia), the Ethnic Language Unit, Curriculum Development Division (CDD), Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MoE), the representatives from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) and the Radio Television Malaysia (RTM 7). It was decided that Semai language would be the first Orang Asli language to be taught in Malaysian primary schools with a significant proportion of indigenous students. Under the programme, the Semai language lessons would be taught by Semai-trained teachers. In instances where there is shortage of teachers, staff from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) were appointed to teach the language.

In 1998, the Semai Indigenous Language Teaching programme was implemented in six primary schools in the state of Perak as the pilot project for Level I (Year 3 & 4), while in 1999, six schools in the state of Perak participated in the pilot project for Level II (Year 5 & 6). The full implementation of the teaching of Semai language in Peninsula Malaysia began in 1999 beginning with the First Phase (Year 3 and 4). The pioneer schools which took part in the implementation of the Semai Indigenous Language programme include:

Sekolah Kebangsaan Pos Pelantok, Sungai Siput
 Sekolah Kebangsaan Air Denak, Tronoh
 Sekolah Kebangsaan Kg Senta, Bidor
 Sekolah Kebangsaan Pos Kuala Mu, Lasah
 Sekolah Kebangsaan RPS Jernang, Sungkai
 Sekolah Kebangsaan Pos Tenau, Slim Village
 Sekolah Kebangsaan Pos Gedong, Bidor
 Sekolah Kebangsaan Batu 14, Tapah

The Semai language classes are conducted after normal school hours in the afternoon. They are divided into two levels: a) Level I: Year 3 – Year 4 (beginning), and b) Level II: Year 5 – Year 6 (Intermediate). Time allocation for the Semai language classes is 30 minutes per lesson and they are conducted for four times a week. The total time allocated for the programme is 120 minutes per week.

4. The Semai Indigenous Language Teaching Programme in Peninsular Malaysia

The Semai Language Teaching Programme is under the responsibility of the Ethnic and Foreign Languages Unit, Curriculum Development Division (CDD), Ministry of Education Malaysia. The Semai Language Teaching

Programme is implemented as part of preserving and promoting ethnic indigenous cultures and heritage of Malaysia. To safeguard the interests and sensitivities of all ethnic groups in the country, a provision was made for the educational needs of ethnic minorities in the country. The Malaysian National policy on ethnic languages is clearly stipulated in Education Act 1996, Act 550 Part 1 and 2 (d) (ii). The act states that “indigenous languages shall be made available if it is reasonable and practicable to do so and if the parents of at least fifteen pupils in the schools so request”.

The main goals for teaching ethnic indigenous languages as outlined by the Unit are as follows:

1. To recognise ethnic languages as a birthright of ethnic groups of Malaysia;
2. To preserve ethnic languages from becoming extinct; and
3. To develop the languages in terms of vocabulary and their ability to deliver ideas and concepts.

One of the main tasks before implementing the indigenous language teaching program was to develop a spelling system. The CDD, through Semai language resource committees, developed a spelling system (orthography) which was based on the Roman letters, in keeping with Malay, the national language. The rationale for this was based on the fact that the Semai learners are already familiar with the Roman letters from attending local primary schools, which are conducted in Malay. The Semai spelling system is based on principles adopted in Malay phonetics and spelling rules. In 2002, to further improve the Semai spelling system, attempts were made by the Ministry of Education to improve and standardize the orthography of the language through the collaborative efforts made by the Curriculum Development Division (CDD), Summer Institute of linguistics (SIL) and the native Semai resource teachers.

The CDD, Ministry of Education Malaysia with the assistance of the Semai language Committee has produced Curriculum and Syllabus Guidelines as well as teaching materials in order to facilitate Semai language teaching. These include the grammar book of Semai (*Bob Tatamengwal*), a trilingual dictionary Semai-Malay-English, as well as reading and writing activity books. These materials serve as references for both teachers of Semai Language as well as non Semai teachers who teach in Semai schools. The CDD is also in the process of compiling Semai folktales to complement other teaching materials.

In addition, to meet the growing demand of the teaching workforce, the CDD, Ministry of Education Malaysia continuously organizes workshops for the teachers, in an order to recruit new Semai teachers as wells as to promote better language and cultural understanding of Semai among non-Semai teachers. The Ministry of Education also feels it is crucial that the non Semai teachers be aware of the local language and culture to teach the learners effectively. It should be reiterated here that in addition to the native Semai teachers, there are also non-native Semai teachers who are involved in the teaching of Semai language in the schools.

In 2001, there were about 18 trained teachers involved in the programme as well as 10 resource teachers available in the state. The number of schools participating in the programmed also increased to 10. Following the success in Perak, the programme was extended to the state of Pahang in 2001, beginning with Level I (Year 3 & 4) while Level II (Year 5 & 6) was introduced in 2002. In 2001, 14 schools in the state of Pahang participated in Semai language Programme with 23 trained teachers and 4 resource teachers.

Table 2 below summarises the number of schools involved in the Teaching of Semai Language Programme in Peninsular Malaysia in 2014.

Table 2: The Teaching of Semai Language in Primary Schools in 2014 in Peninsular Malaysia (Source: CDD, Ministry of Education Malaysia)

	No of Schools Involved
Perak	15
Pahang	14
Total	28

(Source: CDD, Ministry of Education Malaysia (2014))

In 2014, the total number of schools participated in Semai Language teaching programme in Peninsular

Malaysia has increased up to 28 (15 in the state of Perak and 14 in the state of Pahang). Table 3 below shows the list of schools participating in the Semai language teaching programme in Peninsular Malaysia in 2014.

4.1. The Syllabus of Semai Language

Aims: The main aim of Semai Language programme is to enable the learners to acquire basic language skills for communicative purposes, acquiring knowledge and cultivating pride in the language, in line with the Rukun Negara and National Education Philosophy.

Objectives: The main objectives of the programme include the ability:

- a. to listen and understand everyday conversation;
- b. to speak with fluency, to generate ideas and use appropriate language in various contexts;
- c. to read, understand and appreciate different kinds of suitable texts
- d. to communicate well both orally and in written form in various contexts of situation

The Syllabus Content: Language skills include both the receptive and productive skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Language Aspects: This includes oral, reading and writing skills.

Oral skills include listening and speaking skills

Reading skills include pre-reading, reading mechanism and reading and understanding.

Writing skills include spelling, accurate sentence construction and text production.

The syllabus also specifies other aspects of the grammar to be learned by the learners, including syntax, morphology and idioms. It is interesting to note that the syntax of Semai language corresponds well with the standard Malay especially in terms of word order in phrase and sentence levels.

5. The Spelling System (Orthography)

Generally, the Semai spelling system (orthography) is based on the existing Malay orthography. The spelling system of Semai language as stated in the syllabus consists of 23 consonants and 5 vowels.

a. The Consonants

The consonant letters in Semai orthography represents 19 native sounds and 4 borrowed sounds. They are presented as follows: *b, c, d, f, g, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z, ng, ny*

The borrowed letters consist of *f, v, x, z*. e.g. *x-ray, zip, televisyen*.

b. The Vowels

There are five vowel letters in Semai orthography representing 6 Semai vowels. They are: *a, e, i, o, u*
Letter 'e' represents two Semai vowel sounds which are /↔/ and /E/.

The distribution of the Semai consonant letters are presented in Table 5 below:

Table 3: The Distribution of the Semai Consonants in Word Initial, Medial and Final Positions.

Consonants	Word Initial	Word Medial	Word Final
b	bob	abad	sab
c	cak	baça'	-
d	dog	padeh	tod
g	gek	tegar	teg
h	hek	jehu	sekolah
j	joi	derjah	hej
k	ka'	akonj	gek
l	log	telei	keral
m	mat	kemur	nyam

n	nar	kenah	kenon
p	pug	apak	cep
q	-	-	baleq
r	roi	keral	segar
s	suj	mensau	las
t	teu	entoi	kot
w	wey	awat	-
y	yoi	sayet	wey
ng	ngot	sengek	eng
ny	nyi'	nyinyoi	-

The distribution of the Semai vowel letters are presented in Table 6 below:

Table 4: The Semai Vowel Letters

Vowels	Words
a	apak
e /↔/	entoi
e /E/	ame'
i	ilok
o	bob
u	urag

As established previously, the Semai orthographic system is based on the principles of Malay phonetics and spelling rules. This leads to some difficulties as, unlike Malay, Semai language belongs to the Aslian group (Mon-Khmer language). There are significant differences in the phonemic inventory of the Aslian language (Mon-Khmer) and the Austronesian language, particularly in their vowel systems. Steven, Kruspe and Hajek (2006) points out that Mon-Khmer vowel systems are very extensive compared to the Malay Austronesian vowels. For example, there are 10 vowels in Kampar Semai alone. In addition to that, some of the vowels have contrastive length, which are phonemic in nature. However, the existing Semai orthography that is based on the Malay spelling system only accounts for six vowels in the language. As a result, Semai vowels are not adequately represented. The consonantal systems of the Aslian language, on the other hand, also consist of some phonemes which are non-existent in the Malay Austronesian language (Hajek, 2010: 361).

Front	Central	Back
High	ɪ	ʊ
Mid-High	ɛ	o
Mid		↔
Mid-low E		□
Low	⊖	ɒ

Figure 2: Kampar Semai (Source: Adapted from Benjamin (2012))

Another major challenge of Semai language teaching programme in schools is the issue of standard variety because the Semai language is so diverse. According to Diffloth (1977) there are more than 40 variable dialects of Semai, with not all of them are mutually intelligible; each dialect consists of an average of around 700 speakers. These dialects are spoken in the states of Perak and Pahang. Thus, the issue of standardisation is very complex, requiring compromises among the diverse Semai communities. The current standard norm is based on a Semai

variety spoken in the state of Perak, though some words are taken from other dialects of the Semai language. To sum up, the Semai orthographic system needs further improvement in line with a complete phonemic inventory of the language. Adequate and comprehensive documentation and description of the phonological system of the language needs to be carried out involving experts in the area.

6. Conclusion

The teaching of the Semai indigenous language in Peninsular Malaysia has expanded since its first inception in 1998. As a result, the Ministry of Education Malaysia plans to extend the programme to secondary schools incorporating the subject as part of national examination papers as with the indigenous languages of Malaysian Borneo (i.e. Iban and Kadazan Dusun) in the near future. Semai indigenous language teaching provides a school-based programme for indigenous language acquisition and development. It serves as a starting point for preserving, stabilising, maintaining and sustaining the Semai indigenous language, thereby safeguarding it from extinction. The programme helps the Semai indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia effectively develop their rights to save their language and culture. With the literacy and language education programme available to the Semai indigenous community, the intergenerational language transmission are being made possible. This puts the Semai language on the right track as far as the UNESCO scale of language vitality is concerned.

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